

MAN'S CLAIMS IN RELIGION, AND GOD'S RESPONSE.¹

"Jews ask for signs, and Greeks seek after wisdom : but we preach Christ crucified . . . Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."—I. COR. I. 22-24.

MANY men, many minds, says the proverb, and there is no department of human affairs in which it is more true than the spiritual. It is not, as it has been sceptically put, that everyone constructs his own *roman de l'infini* to suit his taste, but that men who are quite serious have their own ideas of what religion ought to be. They know what they want it to do for them, and they think they know the proper kind of evidence by which it ought to be supported. If it does not meet the conditions they prescribe, they feel at liberty to withhold their assent from it. This is not done with any sense of arrogance, but naturally and as a matter of course. If religion does not meet our needs, if it does not come supported by what we regard as the indispensable evidence, how can we have anything to do with it? It does not occur to those who think thus, that they are prescribing to God the manner in which He shall make Himself known, or giving Him notice of the only terms on which they will recognize Him. Yet this is what it amounts to. And while in all such operations of the mind man's need of God is attested, there

¹ A communion sermon.

may quite possibly be something in them which God cannot meet in the way required.

In his work as a preacher of the Gospel, Paul encountered many types of mind, and in this text he describes the two chief. "Jews claim signs, and Greeks are in quest of wisdom". The very form of the sentence shows that Jews and Greeks are to be taken, not in their nationality, but as representative of intellectual types; and it is because such types survive among ourselves that we can make a profitable application of the words.

1. *Jews claim signs.*—For them the evidence of religion was to be given in works of power. They would not believe in God unless He appealed to their senses by doing something extraordinary—something which He was not doing meanwhile. We know how constantly this demand was made upon our Lord. It was a temptation which beset Him from the very beginning of His ministry. If He had cast Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple He would have provided the kind of evidence for His mission that some people required. Show us a sign from Heaven, they said to Him again and again. Even in His agony they taunted Him with His inability to produce that proof that He was from God which they were entitled to claim. "If He be the King of Israel let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him." The modern equivalent of all this is commoner than many people think. When Carlyle said of God, the God in whom Christians believe, "He *does* nothing," he gave expression to precisely this mental temper. It is the temper of all to whom it is a religious difficulty that there is a constitution and course of nature and of human life in

which things go on according to general laws, and in which there is much that is baffling, mysterious, and unjust. If we are to believe in God, they say, let Him do something. Let Him *signalize* His presence in the world by wonderful works of power. "We see not our signs." Let Him make bare His holy arm; let Him break the oppressor in pieces, heal the terrible diseases that fill us with fear and humiliation, interpose visibly and decisively to arrest wrong; let Him satisfy this natural and legitimate demand for an exhibition of His power, and we will believe in Him. But apparently He does not do so. As far as such 'signal demonstrations are concerned, all things go on as they have done since the beginning of the creation. Some people call this a trial to faith; others describe it as an objection to religion; but there it is. God does not accept the dictation of the Jew in us as to the way in which He is to make Himself known.

2. *Greeks seek after wisdom.*—As distinct from natures which crave a demonstration of power, there are those which long for nothing so much as a key to the world and to the life of man. This is what they want in religion, and they will not look at anything as religion which does not put such a key into their hands. The Greeks are a type of this class. They are the most intellectual people known to history. We owe to them all that we call philosophy and science. They believed in the mind, in its powers, its duties, its right to be sincerely dealt with and to have its legitimate demands met. Even in religion they sought intellectual satisfaction. They wanted its preachers to have excellency of speech and of wisdom. They required of religion itself to give them an intellectual

grasp of the world in which they lived, an intelligible interpretation of it ; what was it good for if it did not do so, justifying the ways of God to man, solving the problems which vexed both brain and conscience, reconciling man intellectually to his environment ? It hardly needs to be stated that this type of mind is common enough. It is represented more or less adequately by every one who has what are called intellectual difficulties about religion. A poet of our own day speaks about the burden and the mystery of all this unintelligible world, and what many really crave in religion is such a light upon its nature and destiny as will alleviate the burden and dissipate the mystery. A religion that does not bring such a light, that does not yield a rational explanation of nature and of human life, is not for them. Perhaps the most signal illustration of this is that great estrangement from the Christian faith commonly known as Agnosticism. The Agnostic is a man who has been baffled in the Greek quest for wisdom, and has given up religion as the sphere of insoluble problems. He is a Greek, with a natural instinct for wisdom, which disappointment has paralyzed. He no longer *seeks* wisdom ; he has abandoned such vain adventures ; he stays at home and realizes, with such resignation as he can command, how poorly the house is furnished. God does not meet his claim, any more than that of the Jew, in the way which he prescribes. There may be a key to all mysteries, but it is not put in his hand to start with.

This apparently negative attitude of the Gospel to the claims of Jew and Greek has, I believe, misled many. The impression left on their minds is that the true religion has nothing to do with signs or with

wisdom: it reveals a God to whom miracles and philosophy are alike indifferent. He does not signalize His presence by works of power; He does not cast an interpretative light on the mystery of the world. But this is a mistake, due to breaking off in the middle of the Apostle's sentence. The demands of the Jew and of the Greek are in a sense just, and a true religion must be able to meet them. There must be power in God, and therefore in the true religion; there must be wisdom in God, and therefore the true religion must have a key to the world, a way of looking at life in which the mind can rest. These are not presumptuous but legitimate demands, and the Apostle does not repel them: the very claim he makes for his Gospel is that it meets them. It meets them indeed in a way so startling as to be at first sight almost incredible, but it does meet them. "We preach Christ crucified . . . Christ *the power* of God and *the wisdom* of God"—the very thing which Jews and Greeks required. Jews claim signs? Well, if you want to see all that God can do, the supreme demonstration of His power, look at Christ on His cross, and at what God accomplishes through Him. Greeks are in quest of wisdom? Once more, if you want to find the key to the world's perplexities, to see the very splendour of the light with which God lightens up its gloomiest and most oppressive mysteries, look at Christ on His cross. The one heart-breaking and hopeless mystery of life is sin; the one thing in presence of which it vanishes is redeeming love, the love revealed in the crucified Son of God. Man's claim upon God for a demonstration of power and wisdom is not repelled; it is fully met and satisfied—but at the cross.

No doubt it is very difficult to take this in, and it was probably more difficult for those who could distinctly envisage crucifixion and its horrors than it is for us. Crucifixion was public execution, the shameful death of the lowest criminals. The Jewish name of contempt for Jesus was "the hanged". But the repulsiveness has been felt under all circumstances, and the temptation has often come to the church to ignore or to spiritualize what the Apostle here puts into the forefront as God's answer to man's need—the real person, and the real and shameful death of Christ, recorded in the Gospels. One of the purposes served by the Lord's Supper, which we celebrate to-day, is to provide a check to such tendencies. At first sight it seems strange to find this material element, so to speak, in a spiritual religion. It is so inconsistent, apparently, with the worship of God in spirit and in truth, that some Christians like the Quakers disregard it, and many in all the churches are embarrassed by it, and even when they observe it do not know what to think of it, and could wish they did not need to think of it at all. But in any case it does this for us: it brings us back whether we will or not to the heart of the revelation on which our religion rests: Christ crucified. As often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we show the Lord's death. We are withdrawn from all our prepossessions about God, from all the requirements we address to Him, from all our preconceptions as to the way in which He must or ought to act, and are set down before the reality which shows us how it has actually pleased Him to display His power and His wisdom to men. Here, however startling it may be, is the seat of God's omnipotence ;

here and nowhere else is the key to all that is mysterious in life.

We must notice that the power is uniformly put first : it is of it that we first have experience, and it is only through it that we have access to the wisdom. You want an almighty God, the Apostle says. Where then can you find God exerting omnipotent power, doing what it baffles every other power in the universe to do, except here ? If a child were asked to point to the signs of God's power, he might naturally think of the storm which tosses the sea and the ships ; or of the earthquake which levels cities in a moment and engulfs the pride of man ; or of the lightning flash which shatters trees and towers. Those who are no longer children know better than this even about the forces of nature. They know that the fiercest storm which ever swept the ocean has no power in it at all compared with the silent irresistible swell of the tide. They know that the earthquakes which appalled the world at Lisbon and Messina were insignificant forces compared with the invisible pull of the sun which holds the planets in their orbits. They know that no thunderbolt has potency in it to compare with the sunshine in which we bask on a summer morning. And they know also, if they know anything of themselves and their necessities, that God has more wonderful and difficult things to do than can be done by storm or tide, by earthquake or gravitation, by lightning or sunshine. He has to make bad men good. He has to win again those who have been alienated from him by an evil life. He has to reach their hearts through a bad conscience, and without weakening conscience, nay while vindicating all its

claims, He has to prevail with them to come to Himself. He has to overcome the distrust and fear of men, and to evoke their confidence. He has to subdue them to penitence, to faith, to devotion. He has to do this not for one, but for all; He has to reconcile the world to Himself. It needs an inconceivable power to do that—a power far more wonderful than any that could be exerted through nature, whether in mercy or in wrath. To fill men's hearts with food and gladness would not do it; to blight them with pestilence and famine would not do it. But God does it through Christ crucified. There, at the cross, he wields a power far more wonderful than any of which the Jews dreamed—a supernatural power transcending everything that could have been displayed in such signs as they claimed—an unmistakable, immeasurable, Divine power: a final guarantee of the presence of God.

Paul knew this from his experience as a preacher, and it was because he knew it he magnified his calling. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is a Divine power to save all who believe." He had seen its efficacy, when he wrote to the Corinthians, through a ministry of more than twenty years. We have entered now on the twentieth Christian century, and as we look back on that long stretch of time we can say that the supreme power in the world for good from the beginning of it till this day has been the power of Christ crucified. All reconciling, regenerating, healing influences which have blessed the world have had their seat and centre in the cross. And is it not possible for us to add our individual testimony to the great testimony borne by history? When *we* are bad—when we are selfish, angry, indolent, indulgent, un-

godly—can we keep it up in the presence of Christ crucified? Or if we are determined to keep it up, must we not shut our eyes to this great sight, or go to some place where it sinks below the horizon? To give it the opportunity of telling upon us—to expose ourselves to the power which issues from it—is to give it the victory. This is what we profess to-day as we gather round the Lord's Table. We long to be better men and women, to get dominion over our sins, to be thoroughly right with God. We long for truer penitence, for more whole-hearted, loving, devoted obedience to God. Where in all the world is the Divine power to be found which can work these miracles in us? It is to be found—this is the very meaning of the Supper—in Christ crucified. Our one hope for all this is that He may become dominant in us, establishing His ascendancy in our hearts. The power of God to save, the highest and divinest power God can exercise, is the power manifested in His Passion and operating through it. The Lord reigns from the tree. This is the paradoxical but sufficient answer of God to all who ask signs. He is working wonders all the time which transcend any of which nature could be the scene; and to them, the miracles wrought by the Passion of Jesus, the final appeal lies.

Let us look now at the Gospel as God's response to those who seek wisdom: Christ crucified . . . the wisdom of God. Wisdom is always a hard word, and perhaps it is not possible for us to be sure of what precisely it meant to the Apostle. But we know in what direction to look for the meaning. We know generally that wisdom is that which enables us to recognize the end if not the plan of life—that it is that

which brings light to its mysteries, and even in our dark strivings makes us conscious of the right way.

The great mystery of life, in presence of which the others hardly count, is sin. This is the one thing which after all speculation remains opaque and impenetrable. No reason can cast the faintest gleam of real light upon it. Those who explain it as a mere negation, an unreality—those who regard it simply as an imperfection, and to be outgrown—those who tell us it is but good in the making, and that a bad conscience is the growing pains of the soul—are all alike, when the conscience listens to them, madmen. It is they who are unreal, and whose ingenuities appal by their frivolity and irrelevance the soul which is actually at grips with evil. But though no philosophy as such has ever been able to rationalize sin, though in a world created and sustained by a good God it is and remains an enigma to the mind, at the cross some light falls upon it: we see that whatever its origin, God takes the burden of it on Himself. He does not stand afar off, and decline to have anything to do with the sinful world which owes to Him its being. He *bears* its sin. He enters into the situation sin has created. He takes the pain, the shame, the death it involves, upon Himself: and in so doing He overcomes it and enables us to overcome. The only thing which goes any way to make sin intelligible—in other words, the only thing which in this connexion puts wisdom even imaginably within our reach—is redemption. It is not a new thought, or a new combination of thoughts; it is not anything which the mind could compass by its own efforts; it is a new fact; a new revelation of reality given in a mighty act of God. Here is wisdom for a

world baffled and stupefied by sin : here, in the redemption which is in Christ crucified, sin gets at last a meaning as a foil to grace, and God's love shines out with a power and splendour which but for sin we could not have conceived.

Difficult as the idea of wisdom is, there are two ideas which are always involved in it—unity and purpose ; and Christ crucified appears as the wisdom of God in this respect also, that through the power which issues from Him unity and purpose are brought into our lives. Many people are conscious that their life has neither ; it is fragmentary and aimless ; they do one thing and then another, but they have no dominant motive, no chief end. Life is a thing of shreds and patches, dissipated in a hundred inconsistent directions : there is no wisdom in it, no worthy end, method, or plan. They will never be happy, they will never feel that they have found the key to life, nay they never will find it, till something enters into their being which enables them to say : This one thing I do. And this they will never say till their life comes under the power of Christ crucified. The life consummated in that death is great enough, comprehensive enough, commanding enough, to gather our little lives into its vast eternal sweep, and to bear them on to God. It has absolute unity, absolute certainty of itself and of its goal, absolute consistency and worth. When Christ crucified subdues and impels us—when we can say with the Apostle, I live no longer but Christ liveth in me—we are delivered from inconsistency, futility, and folly, and made wise with the wisdom of God.

Under the guidance of the Apostle we may take

one step further, and try to look not at the blackness of sin, nor at the perplexed individual life, but at the whole world of nature in the light cast by the cross. We are quite familiar with the interpretation of nature which is given by science, and in which everything is explained by reference to antecedent conditions. In the nature of things such explanation is endless. Science can never answer all its own questions, and even if it had done so a further question remains, the only question the answer to which raises us from the world of science into that of wisdom : What is all this world of nature for ? We are overwhelmed by its vastness—its boundless spaces, its immeasurable duration, its inexhaustible life : is there any key to it ? Has it any unity or purpose ? is there any intelligible law which pervades it all and directs it to one end ? Paul is bold enough, and I admit it is the utmost reach of boldness of which the human mind is capable, to answer all these questions in the affirmative, and to say that he knows the supreme law of the world, and that he has found it at the cross. What is revealed there is redeeming love, and it is revealed as the last reality in the universe, the eternal truth of what God is. It is before the foundation of the world ; nay the very foundations of the world are laid in it. Christ is the key to creation ; nature is constituted to be the Redeemer's kingdom. This is not science, but wisdom—this conviction that in Him were all things created, and that all things therefore work together for good to them that love Him ; this assurance that things visible and invisible, things past and to come, all times and spaces and all that fill them, are the destined inheritance of the crucified Christ.

If anyone is disposed to repel all this in words like the Psalmist's—such knowledge is too strange for me ; it is high ; I cannot attain unto it—I admit it is not easy. But the simple fact about Christ crucified is that when He enters into our life it is to fill all things. He will be everything or nothing. It is His destiny to have all things put under His feet, and it is our only wisdom to look at all things in this light. Think what it means to say : We preach Christ crucified. Here, in this place, at this hour, he is held up on His cross, the Son of God, bearing the sin of the world. You wish to know the final truth about God ? Here it is, eternal love, bearing sin. Can you think of a power so wonderful as that which bears the sin of the whole world ? a power so able to regenerate you, and to put the key of life, and of all the mysteries with which it confronts you, into your hand ? Can you want anything better to trust, anything worthier to inspire, anything abler to throw upon all the dark places of life the light of hope and joy ? There is not anything. It is here or nowhere we must learn what the power and wisdom of God mean ; and whatever we may have been seeking or expecting or claiming, it is here, in the presence of Christ crucified, that the voice of God comes to us at last : “ Look unto Me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth : I am God, and there is none else.”